

An Interview with

Sgt. Perry Martin

March 13, 1980

Interviewed by

Laura C. West

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

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Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral  
history interviews with local citizens about the Easter Flood of  
1979. The interviews were conducted during the 1979-1980  
school year.

**AU 514**

- WEST: My name is Laura C. West. I am a junior at Murrah High School in Jackson, Mississippi. This tape is concerning the flooding that occurred in Jackson in April of 1979, around Easter. This tape is for Ms. Canterbury's American history class and was taped March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1980.
- MARTIN: My name is Sgt. Perry Martin, a native Jacksonian. Member of the Pratt United Methodist Church. Member of the choir. Member of the United Methodist men, and chairman for pastor parish relations. I'm a graduate of Jim Hill High School and have received my degree from Jackson State University in criminal justice. I attended the University of Georgia, the University of Southern Mississippi, and also the University of Mississippi and is currently working on my master's degree and (inaudible), and sociology at Jackson State University. I'm married and have three lovely children. I work in patrol and community relations division at Jackson Police Department since 1968. In 1975 I became the director of the Law Enforcement (inaudible) project, sponsored by the Urban League. Presently, my job, public information officer of the Jackson Police Department.
- WEST: Were you directly affected by the flood of '79? If you were, please explain.
- MARTIN: No, I personally was not directly affected by the flood.
- WEST: How did the flood effect the police department as a whole?
- MARTIN: Of course the police department had to maintain law and order during the period of the flooding situation. The police department had to have manpower 24 hours a day during the flood and in the flood area. We worked hand in hand with the civil defense; we also worked along with other agencies that was working with Rankin County, (inaudible) police department, and the police department as a whole worked 24 hours a day during the flood situation.
- WEST: How much crime occurred because of the flood apart from normal occurrences?
- MARTIN: We only had at least, reported, at least four incidents where there was looting. And of course the first situation after a house penalty opposed by Chief Rick Pope, a 50,000 dollar, 500,000 dollar fine for looting. This alleviated the looting situation. Of course we might have had a little petty theft that was going on but the big looting, we did not have any type of outstanding looting, any type of other crime during the flooding of '79.
- WEST: I read in Jackson (inaudible) News that quite a few wife beaters (inaudible) because of the flood. Could you comment on that?

- MARTIN: No, indirectly we did not have any outstanding wife battering or anything like that during the flooding. All was just normal. We have this normal procedure. And we usually have this, what we call assault. Simple assault, aggravated assault, but the normal pattern aggravated assaults was just regular during that particular time. No outstanding wife battering or anything during the flooding.
- WEST: Was the morale on the force low at this particular point?
- MARTIN: No, I think the morale in the police department was very high. Simply because we was affected, the police department had some men that was affected in the department and we tried to keep their morale up simply because some of the men lost all that they had and of course the morale in the police department was very high. The young men or mens on our police department tried to help the citizens who was affected by the flood. They know that they had lost everything that they had. And of course, by them cheering up, made some of the people who was in the area cheer up themselves. So the morale was very high during the time.
- WEST: What are some of the things police officers and officials do during a flood?
- MARTIN: The police officers and officials, during the flood, we work hand in hand with the National Guard, and of course we try to work out a plan to where we could secure the area until the water will go down. We also worked out a plan of evacuation, that we going to talk about later on. I'm trying to evacuate the area before the flooding and the police department as a whole, trying to do everything that is possible, that was possible, during this time, to try to help alleviate the problem that we had in (inaudible) crime or whatever, during the flooding period.
- WEST: Practically, how many officers were personally affected by it?
- MARTIN: We had a total of five police officers affected by it and one indirectly. These five officers, their homes were totally destroyed with the exception of the structure itself. But the inside part of the home had to be re renovated, etc., but we did have five police officers and one indirectly affected by the flood.
- WEST: How many officers were not able to work cause of the flood waters downtown?
- MARTIN: The five officers that I just fore mentioned were the five whose homes were badly, let's use that term, badly destructed by the water. They did not stop working. Now, of course they did have other comp time, they had vacation time, sick time, that where they saw it was necessary to where we would go back and help them to start to renovate their homes. Some of the other

officers would work hours for them, and they would go and work on their home when they get a chance to get to their home back together. But as far as them being off, these officers worked directly just like any police officer that was not affected by the flood.

WEST: Do you feel the warnings given to the public of the purging flood waters were accurate and correct enough to allow people in the flood moments to evacuate?

MARTIN: I personally think that it was. We started on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, during that particular time, when we found out that the water was high enough, we personally placed the police department around door to door in that particular area, asking all the citizens who are going to be directed by the flood to immediately to evacuate their home. Now of course we can't tie anyone down and pull them away from their home, but of course, we gave them warning. Now, in order to move the whole entire structure, the house itself, no, I don't think that was adequate enough warning to move the whole house, but in order to save lives and maybe some of the property, it was enough time for a person to alleviate the home, but of course you have to remember, this is the first thing of its kind. And of course a person just only thought that was going to have a little flash flooding or a little water. But, you can see what the flood of '79 did to us.

WEST: Do you feel the warnings (inaudible)?

MARTIN: Of course not. Now there's, that's something another question begins. Of course are certain items and articles and things down there in a business that a person would sell off. I want to take my IBM typewriter, I want to take this and that, and that would take a period of time. And before some people would leave, they would actually have to see the water coming before they actually decide, let's move. And then, about that time, it was probably too late. But of course, as the water line progresses, progressed during that time, we enhanced the businessmen and general public that the water was rising. You know that a certain leverage was going to anticipate and you know that you're business was going to be under water, you had time enough to try to get what items that you could get out. Of course, keep in mind, we could not move the structural building, but of course the valuables that was inside, we had adequate time enough to move those things.

WEST: In your opinion, (inaudible).

MARTIN: In my opinion, no. because I personally worked as a public information officer. I was giving out releases during the time the stage flood of the water. Exactly when the leverage of the water was rising two inches, three inches, or one foot, or whatever the case could have been. One foot or whatever. But of course, we at that time, was making the public aware of

every move that was going on. Now, of course, for that particular individual, to see that it's fitting that I should move at this time. Of course, we warned them when the water was rising and the other factors that was important during this period of time.

WEST: Please talk to me about the (inaudible) procedures.

MARTIN: Of course, if police worked hand in hand and matter of fact, we had a 24 hour base, I personally myself, did not, in other words, evacuate the people but I personally worked, and of course Chief Greg Pope and all the other officials worked hand in hand, 24 hours a day, trying to see what we could do and alert the public. You know, you have to have a base station and a chief office of the base station where we mandate a certain post and try to let the civil defense and also the National Guard to try to help us to work in this problem, but we worked hand in hand 24 hours of trying to help anybody that was in the water or in the flood area. Several officers who were relieved came up to the department and was voicing their opinion of the help of some individual off duty officers who had to work eight hours tour of duty then put in more hours trying to get out of the flooding area. So, as a whole, the police department diligently to try to help all citizens in any way that they could during this time.

WEST: Was there a workable evacuation plan for the city?

MARTIN: Of course, we tried to work with what was at hand, now keep in mind, this is the first thing of this kind that had happened to the city of Jackson. We anticipate on this. When we saw it, we tried to take what necessary precautions, what type of steps, what type of means, and what type of adequate things we had at the time to try to alleviate what plans we could use, and of course we did what was necessary. We went in certain areas and tried to evacuate and tried to do it in a constructive kind of way. And this is the way we done this evacuation.

WEST: But is it the plan?

MARTIN: There was not, to my knowledge, a certain particular plan that was saying let's evacuate this area. Let's evacuate this area. Simply because we have people who find out that okay I think the water's rising enough. I'm going to leave without anybody's warning, or anybody telling me. But we did have a plan of trying to warn the people about evacuation. But as far as the evacuation, we could not simply because several people leaving on their own and we was trying to assist them in leaving.

WEST: How much damage occurred by the flood waters to raise (inaudible) in dollars and cents?

MARTIN: In dollars and cents, and getting this statistic from the EOC, this particular figure was something over five million dollar. This is residential business, commercial and what have you. This is over five million dollars in damages.

WEST: Is the city more prepared for flood waters (inaudible)?

MARTIN: Yes, of course. The city is now better prepared. We now are beginning to put a leverage on the levee now. We have heightened the levee. In other words, put more dirt on the levee and in case we have this type of situation that would come again, we hand in hand with the people at the reservoir and of course I'm quite sure that many plans have been worked out with them in regards to the flooding and water stage which is a certain height and we will work under precaution the situation.

WEST: What are your feelings on the way the federal government handled the (inaudible)?

MARTIN: I think the federal government did a splendid job and of course there still some claim that probably at this point haven't been resolved, but of course, you know, this is a situation that the federal government would take at ease to make sure that their claims are legit. To make sure that they would adequately serve everybody in their total capacity and before that they would just go out and out and just give money away, that they would make sure that they would have an actual claim and make sure that they tried to help a person totally before they would just say let's just give you a little money just to help. I'm quite sure they did a superb job in trying to get coverage to everybody.

WEST: Do you have any part in the claims being filed?

MARTIN: I wouldn't know and I chatted with someone in regards to this. Of course I don't know of any present claims that have been given. Of course, we would have to find that out later at this stage but now we don't know if there is any fraudulent claims. We will have to wait and see in the future to see exactly what will happen. Is there a claim we'll file and of course it was not correct, then they will (inaudible).

WEST: How do you feel the paper's covered the flood?

MARTIN: To my knowledge in working with the news media, I think they covered it totally. Matter of fact, they was there around with us practically 24 hours a day trying to keep the situation enhanced to let each individual know that this is the type of problem we're having, especially during the looting situation. They put it out strongly in regards to anybody looting. They gonna have to put up a \$500,000 bond and they printed this out. Of course

they know (inaudible). People who needed this and etc., I think the newspaper covered it, covered the flood of '79 very well.

WEST: What are your feelings of the matter of whether the Jackson residents helped or hindered the clean-up effort?

MARTIN: They helped. Every citizen within the Jackson area was out there specifically trying to help their neighbor, their friend, loved one, someone they had lost. They was trying their best to work a workable situation where they help us cleaning up the situation. Now of course, we did have where some citizens was trying to get into the area that we didn't want them to come in, simply because after the water went down then they try to get back and start their own campaign of cleaning but we had a workable situation where a person would have to get back into the flood area so these citizens in one sense helped us in cleaning up, but then we had a slight problem of hindering whether they wanted to get back into the area so readily to help clean up and it did not have passes. And they were getting past from my office and of course several citizens would turn back and come to our office to get their pass so they could go back and help clean up the type of situation.

WEST: The National Guard was off the coast (inaudible).

MARTIN: Yes, of course, and this is just afore mentioned that I just mentioned. The fact that we did have people that was trying to get back into their homes. The National Guard did not know who they were. And of course these particular people did not have passes; they were not allowed to get back into their homes or into their businesses. And of course if you came down to our office and got a pass, we was being so restricted about this simply because we was being precautious because some people was trying to get in the area knowing that this particular person was not trying to get in just to try to see what was in their particular business, or in their homes, and maybe, maybe at that time was trying to loot. So of course we was using all precautions necessary, and of course the National Guard was not letting anyone in if they did not have a pass, a proper pass.

WEST: Would you (inaudible) juncture with the court?

MARTIN: Yes, of course. We worked hand in hand in some of the post areas where we had police officers, we did not have enough man power to put in every entrance and exit point. Of course the National Guard worked in those areas and of course where a person tried to get in and did not have pass, that person did not get in.

WEST: Who called the men in (inaudible)?



MARTIN: The National Guard would call in to find the city officials. When we found out we needed additional man power, of course, in a municipality the mayor will have the power of the city, where he could call the Governor and state that I have a disaster here in our area, I will need an assistance. So this is where you, the city official can in turn and ask the state official and the state official can have the power which our Governor can have the power to call in the National Guard when he see a state of disaster, and this is one of the situations that we had in the flood of '79. so, we asked for their assistance, in any way that we needed, and the National Guard call in and of course assist us maintaining the area, barricading certain areas, trying to put up sand bags and etc. and they was very useful and helpful to us during this situation of the flood of '79.

WEST: Okay, let's go back to the National Guard; I know that there was National Guard stationed at Ridgewood. Why was it posted? (inaudible) and down there (inaudible) Ridgewood, I could get through. I live down there. I could get through there; I don't have my driver's license. I'm sorry sir, but my friends went around back and around Aztec and to my house. My house wasn't flooded, at least. My house was near the worst part of it. Why were the posts at Ridgewood (inaudible)?

MARTIN: Okay now you still remember this. This is where we go, what we call in Mississippi, in Jackson, of course, still where we have the honest policy. For a person would tell you something, we still try to believe this. If I live in an area, which of have already totally been evacuated, been destructed by water, then of course you can pray on the mercy of the person's sympathy, saying, I've given it (inaudible), let me go and see. And this is left up to the discussion of the police officer and security guard to try and take care of (inaudible). But of course if there's any doubt, then he would have said no, I'm not going to let you, you're going to have to show me some type of identification. Now to every little corner pig trail, we did not have the manpower. And of course what we needed for the particular standpoint of point to where we have more traffic and this is where we post a person. Now, of course I am grateful to the fact that we did not have less looting or vandalism or whatever during this time because we could not possibly put a police officer or National Guard at every little corner or intersection so that we can say that we have some citizens in the city of Jackson that are still honest, and didn't do it, and they could have, and of course they did not. And this is what we still rely upon in Mississippi and Jackson as being an honest city.

WEST: You say put it at major traffic construction, (inaudible) it was, well, Ridgewood is like a mile before where the flooding really was.

MARTIN: Okay. In certain areas then we did have where vandalism was taking place, we did have where there might have been some points where people would

feel that sympathy because my house is not in the flooding area, we're gonna have several people come and watch, or stand near, or stand a few feet, or a few yards, or half a mile from where the flooding was. Now I feel that these citizens feel that we needed some protection in our area and I would probably say now, I can't pinpoint every little situation by saying now exactly how that happened, and why that person was standing there but the only reason why I can say this is simply because that there was a need for that particular officer or the National Guard to be there if he was put there at first, at that point, not to just be standing there out of the way. Something had to happen, maybe that was the main point of traffic, where they detour certain traffic and let certain people to go through. Now further down, they maybe might have had another officer or might not, so this might be in your situation but you couldn't concur at the time.

WEST: Why were the city officials, management, and the police department respond earlier request from MP&L officials that MP&L will be allowed to bring dirt and sand into the city to build an up and down and around the distribution center on Tombigbee Street?

MARTIN: When the first point of trucking needs to be done by the MP&L. I don't know if there were negotiations between the city officials or etc. but as the time progressed, of course we did, and I can recall so specifically, so well, the fact that trucks was brought in and day. At night and day. In and out. During the time when we saw that the water was rising, and as you can see, the structure is still standing. I think it was a fact that it was a point where MP&L had to pay for the truck of the dirt to come in and out and of course they're seeing how flood the stage of the water would go simply before they would have to put all of this money into putting this stuff in, so, of course it's not liable to the city officials, I don't think at the time. They said no. they slipped it to the MP&L saying now, if you wanna bring all these truck in to protect us, we can add to that score, and we did. And you can see that that structure is still standing today.

WEST: Can you comment on why the police department in conjunction with city officials also told the telephone company to barricade a street in order to protect valued microwave equipment that was also (inaudible)?

MARTIN: Again, this a still situation that is not linked directly to the police department in regards to the fact to how you gonna protect your business, this is the same way. Let me just illustrate this point: it is still the same way, that if you want to protect your home and you put a fence there, put you a dog, a Doberman pinscher or whatever in your yard. That is directly up to you. It is the same way. The only time when the flooding situation, if they wanted to, if they had the manpower, if they had the money, and they said this is a necessity, that we know that the water stage is going to come up, we need to adequately secure our area. And of course that wouldn't be any

problem with the city official. But now, the way they going to sale, well we going to weigh out and see until we know he's gonna run at the last moment. If we did the system in any way that we know how, but to hinder, or to keep from doing this, to my knowledge, I don't think the department itself wants an official to probably try to do this. Now to my knowledge, that is not the policy that we try to hinder this. It probably was done at the last standpoint to see how far will this particular water is going to go before we try to block off a certain particular area. But to us, if they wanted to block that area off, and to adequately secure their power, we need a telephone service. Without a telephone service, we could not properly function. And even though without electricity, of course we needed this. So I don't think there was any problem that the city official had to handle to the people at the time. But they had the manpower or money enough to try to do this.

WEST: Where does the city now have the emergency operations center?

MARTIN: We now have the emergency operations center now at the old Sears building and to my knowledge, I don't know if this is the normal temporary site but present, because we will probably need a permanent site and of course we need a site to where it wouldn't probably flooded either, because itself took the EOC, the emergency operations center on where it was down in the basement of central fire station and it was underwater so of course they had to try to get out from under water too. So we are now in a much higher location. Much higher situation now so we can adequately try to secure all means of trying to help any particular disaster like this whether than getting in water itself.

WEST: Well why did the police officers state the levees were holding on (inaudible)

MARTIN: Well, to my knowledge, to the time that I think the levee was holding, now of course this is not a constructive type of levee. The levee itself is made out of dirt. Anytime, any point that you got anything that is manmade can give and of course, this was done manmade with dirt. We could have water secrete, we could have where water was going as fast as the (inaudible). Now communication at the point of settling said that the water was only six feet when it was six feet one, but of course by the time that you was bringing bags enough to try to build a levee up, the water was seeping through. So to the point that they was saying that the levee was at a certain point was probably adequately at the time. But of course you can't, you know, just give out news saying it's up to six feet one inch, six feet two inches, six feet three inches, so of course we gave it at a straight interval. A certain time, and it was adequately given at the time. And of course that if any water seeped going through, it was going through beyond the sand bags that they were trying to build the height of the levee. But giving out adequate information was given correctly at that time, but you cannot

pinpoint, with anything steady rising, that you can say right now in one minute, that it's six feet, that's adequate and then you can give it the next minute you say its six feet, no, that is incorrect, because it was six feet point etc., you see? So we couldn't adequately in no time, give the exact height of the water, but we did try to inform the public the exact height while it was there drying in certain integrals.

WEST: Well, that's all for tonight. Do you want to say anything else?

MARTIN: No, I think that we do not. I hope that we will never have a flood like the flood of '79 again.

**END OF RECORDING**